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SEW YOUR SUPPORT

The Sewing Machine Project

The Sewing Machine Project was formed in 2005 for the purpose of bringing sewing into peoples' lives by offering sewing machines, tools and education. The organization works with groups committed to using the machines to provide opportunities to create, learn new skills, build self-confidence and contribute to their own livelihoods and the wellbeing of their families and communities. Since their founding, the Sewing Machine Project has distributed over 2500 sewing machines, helping people become self-sustaining through sewing. We talked to Margaret Jankowski, the founder of the Sewing Machine Project, about how they got started, what they're doing now and how you can help support their mission.

SN: How did The Sewing Machine Project get started?

MJ: I began the Sewing Machine Project (SMP) in 2005, not knowing I was starting an organization. Instead, I was answering a call that I couldn't ignore. I read an article online about a woman who had lost her sewing machine in the southeast Asian tsunami at the end of 2004. When asked what she hoped to find as she returned to her village, she answered "my sewing machine." That tool had been her means to earning an income and was so important to her. As a sewist I thought "I can't imagine what I'd do without my sewing machine," but I recognized that I'd survive without it. For this woman, that was a question mark.

Working in a sewing machine dealership, I met customers every day who, when purchasing a new machine, wondered aloud what they'd do with their old one. It seemed like the perfect answer to me: I'd collect donated machines that people no longer needed and get them to people who needed them. I didn't ask how it would work or where the money would come from. I just trusted that it would work. And it did.

In the spring of 2005, partnering with the American Hindu Association local chapter, we began shipping sewing machines, one at a time, packed into boxes with relief supplies, via USPS to Sri Lanka and India.

SN: How have you expanded since then?

MJ: Later in 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf coast and we shifted our efforts down to that region. I've driven many truckloads of sewing machines to New Orleans. After a few years, I began shipping pallets of machines and flying down to meet them. We had a list of over 650 people who needed machines. Additionally, we've donated to schools and community groups, as well as the Mardi Gras Indian community in the New Orleans area.

To date I've made 18 trips to New Orleans, delivering over 1200 sewing machines to that region alone. Overall, we've delivered over 3000 sewing machines.

We began shipping sewing machines to groups in need all over the United States. Women's shelters, libraries, community groups—the common thread being that they were serving people who wouldn't otherwise have financial access to sewing and sewing machines.

In 2011 we began working locally in Madison, Wis., developing a beginning sewing curriculum to offer through local community centers. We reach out to people who don't have the means to purchase a sewing machine and whose lives would be positively touched by learning to sew, mend and take care of

their clothes. Some people also started sewing for others to earn extra income.

We developed a six-week beginning course where people work on the same donated machine each week, learning to use the tool and also how to care for it and feel confident in its use. One of the lessons requires that students "pay it forward" by sewing something for someone else or teaching someone to sew. We believe this gives our work a ripple effect and also shares the message that everyone has the power to mend their community. Upon "graduation," students

are gifted the machines on which they learn. Most centers end up requesting continuing classes, so we've created intermediate and advanced follow-up curriculum.

We build the pay-it-forward idea into every class and every donated machine, asking recipients to consider how they can use sewing to help others.

SN: What's your most recent initiative?

MJ: In 2013 we began a local free mending initiative. Beginning in a local community center, aligning with their free meal and food pantry programs, we have two volunteers set up for two hours, and they mend whatever people bring in. We do just what

we can do in that two-hour window. About a year after we opened the first site, we added a second mending site at our downtown library, which serves a lot of homeless clients. In January 2018, we added a third site at the Beacon, a downtown day center for our homeless population.

SN: It sounds like there are many types of people that you help. Can you expand on why you don't just focus on a single type of person?

MJ: In these times, we all need to feel the bonds of community. Though this organization focuses on sewing and sewing machines, the broader vision is that we all need connection; we all need community. We are happy to help whomever we can, whether it's teaching

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Margaret helps to unload a truck of machines donated by Baby Lock, Bernina and AllBrands for victims of Hurricane Harvey in autumn of 2017.



Machines wait to be given away in New Orleans, LA. in 2007.

someone to sew, sharing a sewing machine or mending a precious garment. I would say that overall, we are working mostly with adult women but we do offer machines to after-school programs and to community centers, helping men and women. Everyone who touches this organization feels its power, from the machine recipients around the country to newly arrived immigrants in search of community to our volunteers and donors. We take each situation, consider how we might help, and do our best.

I must add that in our work we've also had to ask the question "what are we and what aren't we?" There are times when we are asked to tackle something, for instance starting a sewing manufacturing house, that is currently outside of what we're capable of. We don't have the skill set or the (wo)manpower. That's not to say that we never will — we are always open to the conversation — but knowing when and where to focus our energy is important too, and recognizing that while we might want to take on the world, we are doing what we do well right now.

SN: What accomplishment are you proudest of?

MJ: I am most proud of building an organization given to bringing people together through the use of a simple, yet powerful tool. I am humbled when people compliment me because I'm just doing what I feel driven to do, and I feel so lucky to be able to do this work.

And I'm so very proud of my board and volunteers. I think the team we attract reflects the love, care and honesty of the organization. I'm always astounded by the love and dedication of the volunteers and board. I'm so proud that this idea attracts such an amazing group of people, driven to making a difference.

SN: Are you working on any new projects or initiatives right now?

MJ: I feel like we are always striving to go deep rather than broad. Personally, I'm working to solidify our foundational pieces: making sure our volunteers feel appreciated, assessing the effectiveness of our local classes and mending programs, figuring out the best ways to share the stories we hear from all of the groups that receive machines.

SN: If you had all the resources you needed, what would you accomplish in your wildest dreams?

MJ: We have always operated on a shoestring and done what we can do with the money we have so, it took a moment to consider this BIG question!

I would have the finances and a team with expertise on shipping machines worldwide. We currently work mainly within the United States because it's so expensive and complicated to ship machines to other countries. So if money were no object, I'd have an international team that would vet international applications, prepare and ship machines to other countries. It would mean shipping connections in each country so we could ensure the safe delivery of the machines. My "unlimited" budget would also pay for my volunteers to be able to travel, ensure that new sewing groups are off to a good start and teach in these international locations.

I would have a staff that could coach me on social media, sharing the beautiful stories of machine recipients.


SN: Do you need volunteers?

MJ: Yes, but we are really only able to use local volunteers right now. Here in Madison, volunteers mend, help in the classroom and work on machines.

SN: What's the best way for people to help?

MJ: The best way to help is to make a financial donation to the SMP. We're a 501c3 so it's tax deductible. People can make a donation in honor of a beloved sewist through our Forget Me Not program.

It's great when people contact me because they're inspired to start a mending program in their community. We've had about four or five start up in other states. We're happy to share best practices if a group is interested in starting a mending program or teaching sewing to people in need in their community.

The positive energy and goodwill of people around the world have made all of the difference in the success of this organization. 



Volunteers Kate (left) and Pat mend items at the Beacon Day Center in Madison, Wis.

We build the pay-it-forward idea into every class and every donated machine, asking recipients to consider how they can use sewing to help others.



A Bhutanese student learns to sew in a Sewing Machine Project class.